

The Allerton Park Institute on Library Friends

On November 11-14, 1979, the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science sponsored the twenty-fifth annual Allerton Park Institute at Robert Allerton Park near Monticello, Illinois. This silver jubilee conference was devoted to the work of auxiliary groups which support libraries through donations of time, enthusiasm, political encouragement, money, and books.*

The importance of the topic was evidenced by a capacity registration for the institute. No less gratifying was the wide geographic spread of the ninety-one participants; in all, thirty-two states were represented, with 70 percent of the registrants coming from more than 500 miles away. (Allerton Park Institutes are used to having Illinois as the home state of the largest number of registrants, but it was a pleasant surprise this year that Delaware came in second, Georgia third, and Oklahoma fourth.) The number of small libraries represented, both academic and public, is all the more impressive, and evidences the depth of interest in the topic today.

The reason for the interest is not obscure. Friends groups are springing up across the country in recognition of the classic adage about "friends in need." In the auspicious times of twenty or even ten years ago, libraries could go merrily on their way fulfilling their missions. As Euripides could say of his Orestes, "When fortune smiles, who needs friends?" Happily, it seems likely to be our fate to avoid the disasters of the House of Agamemnon; but oh, how times have changed! In our days of rampant inflation, tax revolts, pressures for more outreach, more computers, better collections, and better services, we prefer to recall another ancient adage about needing all the friends we can get. We are therefore fortunate that we were building up great amounts of residual good will during those happy days of sputniks and Camelots. The value of ancient and long-standing friends is amply documented by adages which scarcely need to be repeated here (readers presumably do not wish to be told once again about King James's old shoes or

* This text is an expansion of the summary remarks at the conference, which were mercifully shortened by the need for participants to catch departing transportation. At that time, I promised to include an anthology of quotations relating to friends which had not, to my knowledge, been expressed during the course of the institute. These can be verified in several standard books of quotations.

Benjamin Franklin's old dog). More to the point: in our days of need, what should we be doing to call on our friends indeed?

The problem begins at home: one makes friends by being a friend. For librarians the notion is at once perfectly natural and disturbingly revolutionary. Notwithstanding the occasional Scrooge or Scroogess whom one might still encounter on a bad day, the librarian's philosophy of today is clearly one of service. But the same philosophy has also held that God in his heaven (or the next best thing, a few godly magnanimous patrons, or the local or, more recently, the federal government) would take care of us. The thought that librarians should pass the hat among readers, associates, fellow librarians, colleagues, and well-wishers — nonsense! Perhaps what we must learn is that there is nothing dishonorable, nothing demeaning, nothing perverse or perverting in the acceptance of charity. It can all be done as quietly as a waiter collecting a tip, as unassumingly (i.e., as assumingly) as an usher taking the offering in church, as stylishly (and with as much formal stylization) as a concert singer accepting a bouquet. The notion that the acceptance of charity is debasing is hard to dispel — for those who do not know the reciprocal dignity of charity. The librarian must learn to ignore the innuendos of the occasional mischievous donor, as well as to question ill-conceived promotional literature which plays down the dignity of the donor. In fact, as the library profession at large seems to be coming to realize, the most forward-thinking of our institutions have been passing the hat for many years — usually with no noticeable evidence of concomitant corruption, and often with magnificent collections, buildings, programs, and good will to show for their efforts.

The problem does begin at home, within the library. Librarians who have been prime movers for friends groups within their institutions will know the diverse sentiments which have been their major obstacles. Does it really make any sense to implement time-motion studies in order to release a staff member to pour tea at a reception? Can the grumbling reader possibly be appeased by an appeal for funds, when he is already asking ten times more than the library ought to be providing? Those librarians who have heard such sentiments will understand how the proposal of the present topic for an Allerton Park Institute was greeted by a nearly equal mixture of strong support and antipathy. The librarian already has too much to think about in running things as they ought to be run; why take on one more time-consuming responsibility?

"*Amici fures temporis*," Francis Bacon warns us: "friends are the thieves of time." They also want things in return as well — perhaps not the formal determination of policy ("pay the piper, call the tune"), but at least a word of gratitude (sometimes profuse words), a few perquisites, supervision of their volunteer activities, and above all, a sympathetic ear

(usually involving a hidden agenda which, for better *and* worse, does indeed concern library policy). It takes strong librarians, and it does, in variable and immeasurable ways, divert the resources of the library as a functioning institution. The basis for the librarian's effort has to be a profound belief that the effort is worth the while. One observation made a particularly strong impression on the participants when it was expressed at Allerton House — to half of them because it was to be taken for granted and did not need stating, and to half of them because it was an unthinkable heresy: library staff members should be encouraged to join their own friends groups.

Some of the reservations about an Allerton Park Institute on library friends do touch on a basic matter: fears were expressed that there would not be enough content to fill an institute. These seem to have been allayed for those who attended the conference (several registrants, in fact, felt that the program allowed too little time for absorption and interaction). More to the point was the question of whether the special needs of librarians were really appropriate for the attention of an academic teaching and research university: aren't they all practice and no theory, so as to call for a "workshop" rather than a formal "institute"? Is there any methodology, any paradigm involved in library friends work?

Is there any theory behind library friends work, or is it all practice? As organizer of and prime mover behind the institute, I had hopes of turning up some principles. They may indeed exist; but if the papers presented here are any indication, they are a good way off. We do now have Edward Holley's five conditions and four myths, Sandy Dolnick's ten commandments, Tem Horwitz's fourteen points, and Marianne Briscoe's four categories of members. These can, of course, generate some very nice multiple-choice questions for machine-graded exams, but the few universals which seemed to be emerging all receded under cross-examination. It was agreed that the head librarian needed to be involved — until several participants described instances where activities were flourishing in spite of administrative apathy. On the other hand, it was generally agreed that administrative antipathy would be disastrous. What formulas are appropriate for a dues structure? The question was asked a number of times at the institute, and ducked just as many times, leaving us back where we were in 1659, when James Howell observed, "Make not thy friend too cheap to thee, nor thyself too dear to him." How much of the income should be spent on membership perquisites, or on the development of a larger membership?

A few universals did emerge, most notably the need for personal relationships. Friends require, if not always individual cultivation, at least some feeling that they are individually worthwhile to the cause of the library. Beyond this (as the old Harvard gentleman's rule goes), "there aren't any rules until you've broken them." May it not be a case of our not

having yet developed enough expertise to formulate the rules? There will surely be more practices in time, good at least for tomorrow if not forever; and library friends organizers will be well advised to become part of the informal community of concerned colleagues. One more "invisible college" will not likely be able to find definitive answers, but it will be essential as a grapevine for advice, and a sounding board for proposals on policy development; such being the case, the Friends of Libraries U.S.A. is as auspicious as it is important. But as for the rules of the game, it seems best here to quote William Penn: "There can be no friendship where there is no freedom. Friendship loves a free air, and will not be fenced in straight and narrow enclosures."

This is not to say that the development of friends groups is not here to stay, or that it is not beneficial. Indeed, those of us who train librarians will be well advised to recognize the importance of this work; but where in our already crowded curricula? A full course on the subject would seem at once both too wasteful and too impractical. The work is far removed from the conventional coverage of either "user studies," or budgeting, or public services, or administration. Scattered admonitions throughout the curriculum would be as useful as a drill sergeant warning new recruits that they will some day be shot at. At the same time, the subject does need to be seen as a pervasive one. The thought of defining, and then recruiting for our library schools, what one might call "friendly types" is simply appalling. I left the institute fully convinced that the topic is vitally important, but as a teacher of future librarians I can see my presentation of the topic being of the decidedly unhelpful form which says, in effect: "you'll need to do it; it's more enjoyable than you might imagine; there is no way to anticipate your problems; so get in there and have fun."

The institute did tend to confirm what might be called the basic unity of the library friends community. In planning the program, the Monday afternoon and evening sessions (Mathews, Wedel, and Seaton) were directed essentially toward public and school libraries, where the basic objective is program support (notwithstanding the strong collection-oriented friends groups in large cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati). In contrast, the Tuesday afternoon and evening sessions (Briscoe, Holman, and Mosher) were directed essentially toward academic and nonprofit special libraries, where the main objective is collection development (notwithstanding the need of all of these libraries for program support as well). As delivered, however, these papers instead seem rather to address a common goal of all libraries. Equally surprising — and basically a pleasant thing to behold, despite a few awkward moments during the institute — was the indistinguishability of the librarians from the many nonlibrarians who attended

the institute, either as active friends of libraries or, in several instances, even as trustees. Friends groups, like most other programs today, depend for their success on prime movers, whether they come from the small world of the library staff or the large world of the library's public.

Tryon Edwards has made a useful distinction between remedial and preventive charity: "The former is often injurious in its tendency; the latter is always praiseworthy and beneficial." The positive approach — whether it emphasizes the classic "margin of excellence" concept, or the recent concern for useful activities no longer within the reach of regular budgetary allotments — is obviously the healthy one. For this reason, it seems to me utterly wrong that a session should have been devoted to the future of library friends; and the absence (to my knowledge) of any references to light at the end of the tunnel is evidence mostly that our faith is in the right place. The faith which builds libraries is simply not the faith which extrapolates fixed laws of human behavior. Rather, it is the quite genuine, even naïve, belief that a change of officers every few years has to be a good thing, not because the new officers will necessarily be poorer or richer, younger or older, less or more educated, but mostly because redefinition is part of the process of staying alive.

Through these essays, however, runs a commitment to a classic conception of the library. Books are the crucial artifact, but not the only one. There does, however, seem to be a common acceptance of the role of the library as a center for all kinds of civilizing activities, involving theater and concerts, films and recordings, grand pianos, even gourmet dinners. The incredulous apathy of the professional library staff member is understandable; after all, his library school training taught him Ralph Ellsworth's Rule 17 for library buildings: "Challenge all proposals to house a museum, art gallery, public auditorium, or any other non-library community activity in the library building."¹ The faith which makes great library friends groups is still a faith in the values which the library has most meaningfully conveyed — intellectual and artistic content, one would like to think, quite apart from the medium involved, be it a document on paper, film, or computer, visually or auditorily perceived.

Victor Hugo, witnessing the destruction of one Paris library in the Commune siege of 1871, was compelled to produce a splendid poem on the cause of books and libraries. There is more than a touch of sympathy in the apology he puts in the mouth of the arsonist: "I can not read." More to the point is Hugo's own ringing assertion:

A library implies an act of faith,
Which generations still in darkness hid
Sign in their night in witness of the dawn.²

If the library itself is our civilization's collective signatory act, the signature on our library friends membership cards expresses the individual faith of those who make up that society today.

The reader of these papers, meanwhile, on several occasions will be usefully reminded of the precise dates of the institute. The sessions took place between noon on Sunday, November 11, and noon on Wednesday, November 14, 1979; Thursday morning began the much-heralded White House Conference on Library and Information Services. A number of persons who attended the institute, including at least two of the speakers, were also planning to attend the conference. As of the time of editing of these papers, there is no way to know what to expect from the conference. No doubt a few of the remarks in these papers would have been stated in a slightly different way from the retrospect of even three or four months; one hopes that the erring will have been on the side of understatement. In several of these papers in particular, the reader will sense the spirit of anticipation, largely one of guarded optimism; the exact time of the institute, in any event, is an important fact for the reader to remember.

In the preparation of these papers for publication, the sequence of delivery has been reordered so as to bring together at the beginning those papers concerned with library friends in general, then those devoted to specialties which concern all kinds of nonprofit organizations involved in public support. One paper delivered at the institute is not included here, being more in the nature of informal background comments with extensive discussion afterward. Gratitude must be expressed to Robert L. Reid of the University of Illinois Foundation for his helpful discussion of legal matters, including bequests, tax appraisals, and, above all, deferred giving programs. The texts of other papers as presented here consist mostly of the prepared talks; it was unfortunately not possible to collect or to summarize the scheduled discussions which followed them, much less the unscheduled discussions which took place at the receptions, around the table of friends publications on exhibit, and on the formal and rustic paths of Robert Allerton Park.

Special thanks are due to the University of Illinois Library Friends for sponsorship of the opening reception of the institute, and to the members of the institute planning committee, which included Prof. Walter C. Allen of the Graduate School of Library Science, Dr. Scott Bennett of the University Library faculty, and Mrs. W. Peter Hood and Mrs. Earl W. Porter of the University of Illinois Library Friends.

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NOTES

1. Ellsworth, Ralph. "Library Buildings." In Ralph R. Shaw, ed. *The State of the Library Art*. New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University, Graduate School of Library Service, 1960, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 28.

2. Hugo, Victor. "Juin," from *L'Année terrible* (1871). Quoted in Alexander Ireland. *The Book-Lover's Enchiridion*. 3d ed. London, Simpkin, Marshall, 1883, p. 297.